

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Find ways to eat nuts without adding calories

I've heard for a long time that eating nuts can be beneficial to your health. But nuts are also really high in calories. How much is enough? How much is too much?

The news about nuts keeps getting better and better. A recent study examining diets of more than 200,000 people from both the U.S. and China indicates that regular consumption of nuts — including peanut butter and peanuts, which are technically legumes, not true nuts — may reduce the risk of early death from heart disease and other causes by about 20 percent.

Another recent study looked at data from 2,000 teens in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Preliminary results indicate that young people who eat a modest amount of nuts — at least three small handfuls per week — reduce their risk of developing “metabolic syndrome.” Metabolic syndrome is diagnosed when someone has at least three of the conditions that can lead to heart disease later in life: obesity in the abdominal region, high triglycerides, low “good” cholesterol (HDLs), high blood pressure and high blood sugar.

Nuts are beneficial because they are chock-full of nutrients, including vitamin E, which may reduce development of plaques in arteries, and omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3s can help reduce triglycerides, lower blood pressure, reduce blood clotting, decrease risk of stroke and heart failure, and reduce irregular heartbeats.

Unfortunately, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only about 40 percent of Americans eat enough nuts to see a health benefit. And the metabolic syndrome study on teenagers found that only 9 percent of young people ate enough.



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Still, you are correct that nuts are high in calories, and those calories need to be taken into account. Most nuts contain 160-200 calories per ounce. Over the course of a year, eating an ounce of nuts a day could add up to 10 pounds on the scale if you don't cut back calories in other ways.

In the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, nuts are considered a protein. While the guidelines recommend that the average adult eat about 5.5-6 ounces of protein a day, a half-ounce of nuts or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter is counted as a full “ounce” of protein. Generally, a half-ounce of nuts equates to a small handful — about 12 almonds, 24 pistachios or seven walnut halves, for example. But go ahead and use a food scale if you want to be sure of what you're eating.

As long as you reduce calories from other parts of your diet, eating between a half-ounce to an ounce of nuts several times a week could be beneficial. Consider:

- Adding walnuts to a salad.
- Snacking on peanuts instead of chips or cookies.
- Sprinkling peanut halves or slivered almonds onto green beans or adding ground nuts to spinach or mashed cauliflower.

Finally, opt for raw or dry-roasted and unsalted nuts most of the time. And don't fool yourself. Eating nuts coated with sugar or nut-based candies can undermine their heart-healthy benefits.

March 13, 2015

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